

INTERPRETING YOUR CHURCH'S INVENTORY:

A Few Notes to Get You Started

INTRODUCTION

Before you lies the task of reflecting on your Inventory data. In addition, you have the task of understanding this data in relation to the variety of congregational questions that prompted this self-study. Plus you must both determine the depth and best ways to report this information to the general congregational membership. Finally, you and they together must determine what this new knowledge implies about your future directions and how you might act on these implications. None of these are simple, easy tasks, but any action taken, which is based on informed self-reflection, is always worth the effort in the long run.

These data are contained in the pages of tables that follow this introductory note. These many pages of tables and charts can appear quite overwhelming at first glance. Rest assured that this task of interpretation can and will be done and that the end result will be well worth the time and effort you spend at it. Hundreds of congregations that have used the Inventory before you have proved this is a doable task.

The purpose of these general notes is to get you off and running. We recommend that you be patient with the process; the digestion of your Inventory data will take time! If you are particularly uncomfortable with numbers and statistics, we suggest that you seek the help of persons who have some background with figures. Most congregations have such persons within their membership – a bookkeeper or accountant, data processor or corporate planner, for example. We also recommend that you use the suggestions in this introduction to guide your exploration of the information.

IT'S YOUR CONGREGATION

The data reported in the following tables are from your membership. These respondents are a group of faithful individuals who have intentionally gathered together as a body of believers in service to God and God's creation. We wish you well in using this Inventory data to enhance the faithfulness of your efforts to be responsive, through God's enduring grace, to that call. We also compliment you on having been willing to be self-reflective. Looking into a mirror is not always pleasant but it is always revealing.

One question that we are always asked is "How does our congregation compare to others?" We are working on materials to help you answer that question with the cumulative data of all congregations who have taken the Inventory, however given our recent change in the Inventory we do not yet have much comparative information.

We do not encourage congregations to spend a lot of time focusing on the comparative

information. Our experience working with churches indicates that more is gained by downplaying the urge to know “how we are doing compared to others.” Avoiding this temptation forces a congregation to focus on itself, on its unique resources and situation, strengths and weaknesses, on the unique gifts, needs and perceptions of its members, on its unique connectedness (and lack thereof) to the world around it, and on its unique understanding of its call to ministry.

It's your congregation and most concretely that means a unique group of people working together to heed God's call. In honor of that common calling and common task (not to mention effective decision-making) we hope that the data from your Inventory is widely shared and discussed. At first glance at the tables and charts, however, should make it clear that when the data is shared with the broader congregation it will need to be shared in a more concise, focused way than this full report. This may take the form of a paper handout with summary, narrative statements or paragraphs and perhaps a few charts; or a PowerPoint presentation that covers the highlights and challenges in the information given at a Sunday afternoon congregational meeting. Perhaps an article in the church newsletter might work best or a section on the member section of your church's the web site. Only your creativity sets a limit on how this can best be done for your purposes in your congregation. For example, one congregation wrote a play, which was then performed before the entire congregation. Another drew up six large charts that were posted in the fellowship hall. Several others wrote a series of short narrative paragraphs that were featured in the congregational newsletter and bulletin over a several week period.

While we think it is important to share the general results of the Inventory with the entire congregation, you may also find it helpful to direct specific segments of the results to those committees or task groups who are formally charged with the oversight of the subjects covered in those segments.

However you decide to share the data with your congregation, we would suggest that you make a copy or two of the report available in your library or congregational office for anyone who might have the inspiration to experience it for themselves. One advantage of the Inventory is that it potentially opens the information gathering process to all that choose to participate. Having the tabulated results available to anyone interested in seeing them continues the spirit of openness.

HOW SHOULD I BEGIN

First, make working copies of the original. Then, set aside time (away from the phone if possible) for the congregational board or study committee members individually to read the report quietly and completely. You may want to make notes on the copy in the margins or on the text. Some of what you see may be challenging to your experience. It is perfectly justified to talk back and argue with the findings of the report. You don't need to accept it all as gospel. Do not forget the best source of information about your congregation is your own experience in your congregation and in your community.

Use the questions below to help guide your reflection on the information. We often use these questions to help guide a committee in uncovering the patterns within the report. Additional copies of this set of questions, as a handout, are provided within this packet of material.

1. *What do you make of the data generally?* Does it resonate with your perceptions of the congregation? It is a familiar picture? Identify those items that seem to be congruent with your observations and experience. How does the demographic profile of the survey compare with your observations? Is there a group missing? Is one particular faction of the church over-represented, such as the leadership, the older, long-time members? What might these patterns of who responded have to do with the findings reported in the survey?
2. *What findings did you react to?* What struck you as commonplace and obvious? Which results disturbed or surprised you, and why? Mark those places that seem to challenge your taken-for-granted reality. Why did these items surprise you, anger you, or cause you to be puzzled?
3. *How do your results compare* to previous congregational profiles or other surveys you have done of the congregation?
4. *Examine the rank order of average responses* in certain sections. Which questions (church tasks, organizational characteristics, etc.) were scored highest, which were ranked lowest? Did these highs and lows form a pattern? Were the rankings in different sections of the survey parallel to each other, was it expected?
5. *Examine the distribution* of the percentages of persons scoring high or low on an individual question. Are there minority opinions around certain questions or are all respondents of like-mind? Are there patterns to the minority opinions, such as a consistent 25% of the responses were against all the questions about congregational openness? Is there a large group who did not answer a question or section, and if so, what might that imply? From your experience are these minority opinions expressed openly in the congregation or are they kept hidden and were only expressed anonymously on the Inventory?
6. *Use one section of the survey as a comparison to another*, to help temper, critique or illuminate the findings or questions within another section? How do the congregational priorities compare to the tasks of the pastor, or the mission priorities? How do the comments reflect or illustrate the numbers found in the questionnaire?

Once the individuals have worked through the report, become familiar with it, and recorded their own insights, find a time for the entire committee to discuss the findings. You might want to discuss each section systematically in a large group, or just randomly address each person's observations, or divide the group into small teams each addressing one of the sub sections to prepare a short report for the larger group.

After your committee has analyzed the report you might want to move in several directions. First, you might want to find additional information to confirm or supplement the report's findings. You could interview key people in the congregation, or call a focus group together to discuss conflicted issues, or you might want to collect census data or do an in-depth financial report – whatever needs to be accomplished to answer persisting questions or fills in the knowledge gaps. Second, you would want to share these insights with other congregational leaders and, more broadly, with the congregation. Difficult questions are raised in the reporting of what your group found. What information should you present, in what format, and in what forum? How can you present this data in a way that constructively engages the whole congregation? What efforts must you take to distribute, wrestle with, and learn from the information that will help you accomplish the tasks you set for yourself at the outset of the survey project?

The tables and charts in your Inventory report are intended to stimulate discussion about your congregation, its ministry, mission and leadership needs. This material can provide entirely new insights, new perspectives on lingering hunches and/or support for taken-for-granted assumptions. Whatever the case, the usefulness of the information depends in large part on your ability to add flesh to the statistical data. The numbers alone mean very little; it is when you can supplement them with the knowledge and experience derived from living in and being a part of your community of faith that the numbers truly come alive. The key to remember in this regard is that the Inventory will not, in itself, make any decisions. Rather, it provides information that informs the leadership and program decisions you have to make.

LEADERSHIP ISSUES WITHIN A SYSTEMIC MODEL OF THE CHURCH

The obvious intent of these inventories is to provide you with a statistical portrait of your congregation in order to guide the pastoral search, church planning or parish self-reflection processes. The Inventories contain a profile of members' demographics, and their expectations and evaluation of the congregation's ministry. Such information is included for two reasons. First, leadership decisions cannot be made realistically apart from programmatic, organizational and membership concerns, nor can programmatic retooling take place with no thought of the leadership requirements. Second, a larger perspective of the membership provides an important baseline of information with which congregation and pastoral leadership can begin to plan their ministry together.

In designing our inventories to provide this larger perspective for congregational or pastoral planning, we have worked from a very explicit model of the congregation. This is a model that strives to balance the complexity of a congregation with the need for a relatively simple set of lenses that make this complexity understandable and manageable. The major tenet of the model is that a congregation must be understood as an open system. While this may seem somewhat strange to readers unaccustomed to thinking in this way, we believe that it is a helpful perspective.

There are several points that can be made about this assumption.

1. To use the image of a system implies that there is a degree of coherence or order about a congregation that grows out of a sense of a central purpose. It is a congregation's central purpose that gives meaning to the various aspects of its life -- its programs and activities -- as well as emphasizing its difference from other systems such as schools, businesses, political parties or even other congregations. Defining the central purpose of one's congregation is a crucial and critical task. One very general definition of a congregation's central purpose is to promote among humankind the love of God and neighbor. However, the way a particular congregation gives expression to its central purpose is unique to its sense of itself and its identity. This distinctive expression of congregational life reflects the attempt of leaders and members to understand the meaning of the Gospel in a particular time and place. Being clear about your central purpose, your identity and cultural character can help leaders and members to assess the contributions of various elements within the congregational system in fulfilling its purpose.
2. The systems image also implies thinking of congregations as consisting of several elements that work together more or less interdependently. One significant implication of this notion is that changes in one component of the system will very likely result in changes or responses in other parts of the system. For example, an aging membership (change in members' characteristics) will often be associated with declining Sunday School enrollments (a change in program). Building on this notion of interdependent parts, our inventories try to provide at least some information on all major components of the congregational system--member characteristics and commitment, tasks of the congregation, organizational characteristics including facilities, and congregational identity--and more detailed information on leadership characteristics, style and roles.
3. Describing a congregation as an open system calls attention to the fact that it exists in a

particular time and place. The congregation both affects and is affected by its environment. The walls of the building do not keep out the influence of the congregation's local and global setting, nor do these walls prevent the congregation from having an impact on its local or global setting. The everyday lives of a congregation's members are the major link between a congregation and its social context. Therefore, the social characteristics of the congregation's membership are important indicators of the possibilities and limitations inherent in the relationship between the congregation and the world. In this regard it is well worth remembering that while most church professionals tend to view the world through the congregation, most lay members view the congregation through the world of their everyday experience. In addition to these more informal and implicit links between congregation and community environment, congregations' also have more formal and programmatic connections with the world beyond the congregational building. Inventory questions on mission obviously attempt to tap into this aspect of congregational life, as well as several questions in the section on congregational identity.

We hope this sketch of our systemic assumptions regarding the congregation, which lie behind the survey, identify our position. But we also hope it warns committees that like a pebble dropped in a pond, the ripples of our decisions and actions can disturb the entire surface.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE REPORT ITSELF

RETURN RATE

In only one congregation that we know of has everyone, who received a questionnaire, returned it. The more normal situation is for only a portion of those receiving the questionnaire to return it. The proportion or percent of those who do is called the *return rate*. It is computed by dividing the number of tabulated questionnaires by the number you mailed or handed out--which hopefully you know. Return rates typically vary from 25% to 60%, with the average about 35%. If your return rate is low (**less than 40%**), it is very important to compare the group of questionnaire respondents with some known characteristics of your total membership, for example, age, gender and marital status. Are there similarities or differences between the known characteristics of the membership and those who returned the questionnaire? This will give you a good clue to the representativeness of the returns. Also look at the worship attendance distribution. Are infrequent attenders over or under represented? Such checks as these will help you take into account any obvious response biases in your interpretation of the Inventory results. It is typical of nearly every congregation who has used our inventories that the respondents over-represent those who attend quite often, are older, are long-time members, and hold leadership positions in the church. For this reason it is important both to realize the average scores may most accurately reflect your frequent attendees than the congregation as a whole and that the sub-group breakdowns are crucial for getting clues as to how younger, newer or infrequent attendees feel about the survey issues.

TYPES OF STATISTICS PRESENTED

Only two types of statistics are contained in the tables and charts of the standard report. Both statistics are ones most people use just about everyday--percentages and means (averages) and in a few places the actual number of persons answering a question in a certain way.

Percentages: The percentage distribution of responses is reported for each questionnaire item. It is the percentage of persons who chose each of the possible response categories for any given question. It will not total 100%, for most items, both because of rounding off percentages to the nearest whole percent and due to the fact that certain persons chose not to answer a question (missing cases). To find the number that chose not to answer a question, add the percentages given and then subtract that from 100%. This will roughly tell you what percentage chose not to respond to a question.

In looking at the percentage distributions you will want to consider the following. Are responses bunched together? If so, there is considerable agreement or commonality among members in regard to this question. Are responses spread out across the categories? This suggests a considerable difference of opinion or characteristics. If so, you may want to try to discern if there are distinctive groups or enclaves within the congregation that hold divergent opinions. Likewise, you might want to ask, if a large group did not choose to answer, why that is so.

Averages:

In addition to percentages, the only other statistics you will find in the data tables are means. (A "mean" is the technical statistical term for what is more commonly known as an "average".) The mean of the response to a question is reported for questionnaire items for which an average score would have meaning. (For example, it doesn't make much sense to talk about the average sex of respondents.) Averages are particularly useful in comparing items with each other, because they summarize the entire range of responses to an item into one number.

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

The process of congregational self-reflection is ideally one that need not end once this Inventory is analyzed, interpreted and presented. A survey is but one of many ways by which a congregation can think critically about its identity, mission, and place in God's world. Other methods of congregational self-study, as well as diverse interpretative frames, can be found in the 1998 book *Studying Congregations* edited by Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley and McKinney and published by Abingdon Press.

Recently, data from a national study of 14,300 congregations was made available at www.FACT.hartsem.edu. This web site of the study, entitled *Faith Communities Today*, contains an interactive workbook where a congregational study group can take a portion of the survey and compare itself to a large group of churches and then be guided through a process of reflection around specific issues. These and other online resources are available through the **Hartford Institute for Religion Research** web site at www.hartfordinstitute.org.

Questionnaire data should act as a mirror, allowing us to see ourselves from a fresh and at times challenging perspective. This reflection often raises as many questions as it answers. The usefulness of a report like this is not so much in what it "tells" about a congregation but in the stories and new directions that are stimulated through an honest encounter with the information. We hope that these data and this report are not the end result of self-examination but rather are one more step along your journey toward vibrant congregational well-being.